

Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling in Bequia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines

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Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling in Bequia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines

Hisashi Hamaguchi

Sonoda Women's College, Japan

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Abstract

Bequians, having learned whaling skills from American whalers, began whaling in 1875 or 1876. Their main target was the humpback whale. The harvesting of humpback whales by Bequians has been approved as a form of “aboriginal subsistence whaling” by the International Whaling Commission (IWC) since 1987, with a catch quota of 20 permitted for the 2008 to 2012 whaling seasons. This paper describes and interprets aboriginal subsistence whaling through a case study of humpback whaling in Bequia. By focusing on the discussions of amendments to the Schedule to the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW), it examines in detail how Bequians have figured in the international debate on whaling. Then this paper demonstrates how discussions within the IWC are rooted in politics rather than science.

1. Introduction

This paper describes and interprets aboriginal subsistence whaling through a case study of humpback whaling in Bequia. First, it provides a brief history of whaling in Bequia. Next, the focus shifts to the current whaling conditions and activities. Finally, by focusing on the discussions concerning amendments to the Schedule to the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW), it considers how Bequian has figured in the international debates on whaling. It should be noted that much of the material in sections 2 and 3 of this paper is based on Hamaguchi (2005), but updated as necessary. It is reproduced here to provide historical and social contexts to the subsequent sections dealing with Bequia and IWC.

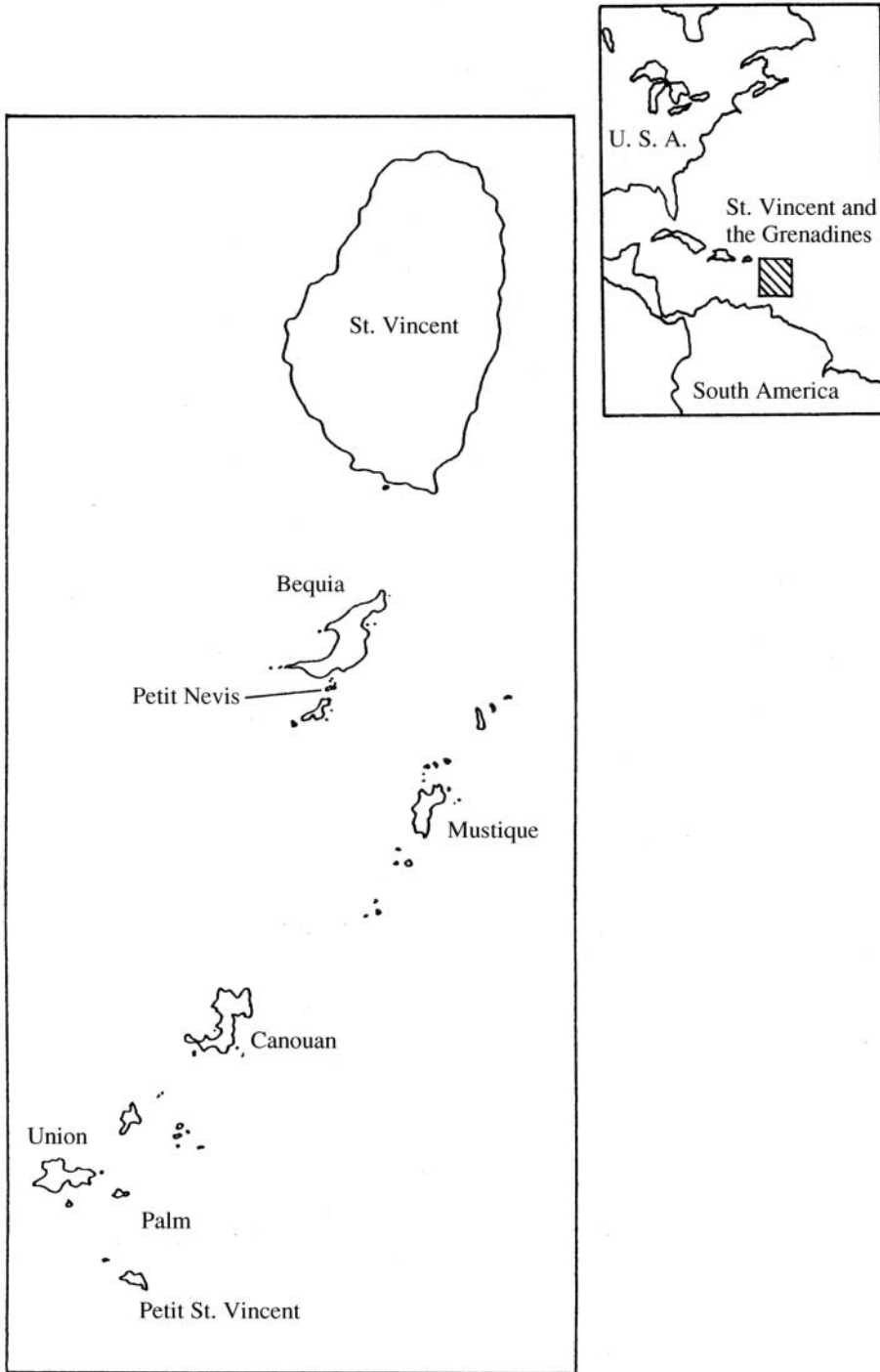
Bequia, a small island in the Caribbean Sea, is situated at 13°00'N and 61°15'W (Map 1). It has a total area of 18.1 km², had an estimated population of 5,800 in 2002, and is part of the independent nation of St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

A number of Bequians learned skills from American whalers, and they began whaling in 1875 or 1876. Initially, whaling was done using hand harpoons and hand lances from whaleboats powered by sail and oars. These methods of whaling were still being used in 2010.

The harvesting of humpback whales in Bequia was approved as a form of “aboriginal subsistence whaling” at the 39th Annual Meeting of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) held in 1987 (IWC 1988: 31). A quota of three humpback whales per year was permitted for the 1987/88 to 1989/90 whaling seasons (IWC 1988: 31). The quota was increased at the 59th Annual Meeting of the IWC in 2007, and 20 humpback whales were permitted for the 2008 to 2012 whaling seasons (IWC 2008b: 156).

2. Whaling in Bequia: A Brief History

In the early 19th century, whaling ships from New England made regular cruises to the Caribbean Sea in search of sperm whales and humpback whales, and visited the Lesser Antilles frequently (Adams 1971: 55, 59). American whaling activities in the Grenadines reached a peak during the 1860s and 1870s, when a number of Bequians were employed



Map 1 Bequia and surrounding areas

on American ships and where they learned whaling skills (Adams 1971: 60). They began whaling independently in 1875 or 1876, targeting mainly the humpback whale, which came close enough to shore to be intercepted by whaling boats launched from the beaches (Adams 1971: 60, 65).

The indigenous whaling enterprise in the Grenadines, including Bequia, reached its peak around 1910, when 100 men were engaged in harvesting and processing humpback whales (Adams 1971: 56). In the early 1920s, the Grenadines maintained six shore whaling stations, each equipped with three to five whaling boats (Adams 1971: 62). However, since 1925, whaling in the Grenadines had declined, with only a few humpbacks having been harvested annually, and only by whalers from Bequia (Adams 1971: 71).

No humpback whales were harvested between 1949 and 1957, but a catch of three in 1958 encouraged the whalers. As a result, they constructed two new whaling boats (Adams 1971: 71). In 1961, they constructed a modern, well-equipped shore station in Petit Nevis (Adams 1971: 71). Nevertheless, the catch decreased again during the 1970s, when whaling activities were on the verge of collapse (Price 1985: 415).

However, four humpback whales were harvested in 1982 and three in 1983 (Price 1985: 418–419). The success of these two years again reactivated the industry, and a new whaling boat was constructed in 1983 (Price 1985: 418–419). For 27 years, from 1958 through 1984, a total of 54 humpback whales were struck and 44 of these were landed (Price 1985: 419 Table 4).

Since 1925, whaling activities in Bequia had depended on successfully harvesting a few humpback whales a year. Although this had led to a certain fragility in the whaling economy, such catches could sustain the livelihood of Bequians. Bequians had been engaged in whaling not only for monetary considerations but also to acquire prestige, as only the strongest and most reliable men were recruited for whaling (Adams 1971: 61).

3. Whaling in Bequia: Current Conditions

The whaling season begins in early February, when humpback whales head southward to their breeding grounds between the islands of Bequia and Mustique (Map 1). The season

Table 1 The catch record of humpback whales in Bequia, 1991–2010

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-------|
| year | 1991 | 1992 | 1993 | 1994 | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 |
| catch | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| boat | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 |
| 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | total |
| 2 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 22 |
| 3 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | — |

(source: the author)

potentially lasts until early May, when the whales return northward through the same waters. However, whaling ceases when the catch quota is met.

The total catch during the twenty years from 1991 through 2010 was 22 whales (Table 1)¹⁾, an average of one or two whales a year. By the 1990s, as crewmen became older, the number of active whaling boats decreased to only one during the period 1991–1995. It was the most depressed period of whaling in years, and for these reasons the catch was extremely small (three whales in five years), with none being harvested between 1994 and 1997.

A new whaling boat was launched in 1996 and its crew including the harpooner, was much younger than the average. During the 1998 season, two boats succeeded in harvesting two whales. Without a doubt, this first success in five years renewed the motivation of the whalers and once again increased enthusiasm for whaling. Two whales were harvested in each season from 1999 through 2002.

In July 2000, a renowned harpooner who had led the whaling in Bequia for over 40 years, passed away at the age of 79. He was a fourth-generation whaler, with roots dating back to the beginning of whaling in Bequia. Today, the fifth and sixth generations continue whaling operations in Bequia.

3.1 Whaling Implements

Since 2002, two whaling boats have been used in Bequia (Table 1), but from 2000 to 2001, three were in operation. The prototype of the Bequia whaling boats was the Nantucket-type whaling boat, which was 28–30 feet (8.5–9.1 m) long. When the first whaling boat was constructed in Bequia, it was only 25–26 feet (7.6–7.9 m) long (Adams 1971: 63). The current boats are slightly larger. The oldest of the three whaling boats was constructed in 1983, renovated in 1999 and sold off as a fishing boat at the end of the 2001 whaling season. The second was constructed in 1996. These two boats were said to be 27 feet (8.2 m) long and 7 feet (2.1 m) wide. The third and newest boat, which had originally been constructed as a wooden fishing boat, was refitted and fiberglassed as a whaling boat in 2000.

The renowned harpooner who died in 2000 said that he was once dragged underwater together with his boat by a harpooned whale, and on another occasion his boat was lifted onto the whale's back and flipped over. Based on experiences such as these, the whaling boats were improved and made slightly larger and stronger than the first ones constructed in Bequia.

The oldest (1983) whaling boat was equipped with four 3 m harpoons, three 3.8 m lances and two 94 cm shoulder guns. The second oldest (1996) whaling boat is also equipped with four 3 m harpoons and three 3.8 m lances, as well as one darting gun 2.47 m long.

The basic technique of harvesting a whale is to weaken it by thrusting the hand harpoons into its body, and then to give a final stab with the hand lances. Sometimes, a shoulder gun or darting gun is used to shoot a bomb lance. Since a bomb lance costs 400 East Caribbean (EC) dollars (US\$150)²⁾, a significant expense for the whalers, they are used prudently, as a miss is costly. Although for the most part these implements now

may seem outdated, they are still used with considerable pride by the Bequian whalers.

3.2 Whaling Operations

On a Sunday in early February, an Anglican priest blesses the whaling boats, and prays for the safety of the crews and for a successful harvest. Then the whaling season begins.

During the season, the whalers congregate on the beach at Friendship Bay, on the windward side of Bequia, at around 6 a.m. every day except Sundays, public holidays and on days when the weather is obviously unsuitable. At that point a decision is made whether to go whaling, which depends on the weather and sea conditions.

When the whalers do go out, they head for the Island of Mustique, about 13 km southeast from the bay, at approximately 6.30 a.m. At approximately 8 a.m., they arrive at the island. After mooring the boats beside the beach, the crewmen climb a hill and wait there. While waiting, they take turns scanning for whales through binoculars and, using fish caught on the trip over to Mustique, make soup for breakfast.

Meanwhile, a lookout and helpers remain on a hill back in Bequia, scanning for whales through binoculars. When one is spotted, they inform the crewmen on Mustique using marine radios (or cell phones since 2003) (see Hamaguchi 2011: 226–227). The whaling boats then start to pursue the whale. If they catch the whale, they tow it to the shore station in Petit Nevis (or in Semple Cay since 2005) with the help of a fishing boat with an outboard engine, where it is processed (see Hamaguchi 2011: 230–232). This



Photo 1 An anchored whaling boat at the Britannia Bay, Mustique (2005)

routine continues throughout the three-month whaling season, or until the quota has been harvested.

Six crewmen serve on board each whaling boat. From the bow to the stern, they are: 1) harpooner, 2) bow oarsman, 3) midshipman, 4) tub oarsman, 5) leading oarsman, and 6) captain.

When rowing, the harpooner, midshipman and leading oarsman sit to port and the bow oarsman and tub oarsman sit to starboard. The captain handles the steering oar in the stern. When sailing, all members except the captain sit or stand on one side according to the wind direction and the captain steers at the stern.

The harpooner has absolute authority over whaling decisions. When the boat is about 10 feet (3 m) behind the whale, the harpooner thrusts the first harpoon into it, and then the second, third and subsequent harpoons. After a “Nantucket sleigh ride” on the sea, if necessary, the harpooner shoots a bomb lance into the whale.

The captain steers the boat from the stern, adjusts the mainsail and takes all responsibility for sailing the boat. Immediately after the harpooner has thrust the first harpoon into the whale, the captain quickly winds the rope around the loggerhead. He also keeps the boat a certain distance from the whale, making it easier for the harpooner to thrust the second and subsequent harpoons into it. In the past, the captain changed places with the harpooner after the harpoons had been inserted, after which the captain killed the whale with a hand lance or a bomb lance. Nowadays, however, the harpooner kills the whale.

The harpooner and captain require a high level of skill in harpooning and steering the boat. However, it appears that the other crewmen can manage their roles with training onboard if they are capable fishermen. Generally, an apprentice crewman joins a whaling crew as a leading oarsman and is promoted, step by step, from tub oarsman to midshipman and then to bow oarsman. A bow oarsman is equivalent to an apprentice harpooner, and sits behind the harpooner, where he learns harpooning skills.

3.3 The Distribution of Whale Products

In the Bequia whale fishery, a “share system” is used in lieu of wages. Harvested whales were processed at the shore station in Petit Nevis until 2002, and at the shore station in Semple Cay since 2005³). The whale meat and blubber are, respectively, put into tubs (one tub equals one share) and distributed to all persons involved in the whaling operation.

Let us consider the actual distribution used in 1998. For whale meat, the two boat owners received two tubs (two shares) each and the twelve crewmen, the lookout and the owner of the shore station received one tub (one share) each. The same distribution was repeated until all the meat was distributed. As a result, the two boat owners each received two-eighteenths of the total meat, while the others received one-eighteenth. In addition, the two boat owners doubled as the harpooners, and therefore each of them received a total of one-sixth of the total meat.

As for blubber, the boat owners received one tub (one share) between the two of them, the officers (the two harpooners and the two captains) received one tub (one share) between the four of them, and the other eight crewmen, the lookout and the owner of the

shore station received one tub (one share) between the ten of them. The same distribution pattern was repeated until all the blubber was distributed. As a result, the two boat owners each received one-sixth of the total blubber, the four officers received one-twelfth each, and the others received one-thirtieth. In addition, the two boat owners doubled as the harpooners, and therefore each of them received a quarter of the total blubber.

The harpooner and captain received the same share of whale meat as the other crew members, but received a larger share of blubber. This reflects the fact that whale oil was rendered from blubber and exported to England and the USA in the early 20th century (Adams 1971: 69), and the sale of the oil accounted for a majority of the economic return in the whaling industry.

After the renowned harpooner-boat owner who had led Bequian whaling for over 40 years died in 2000, the share system was simplified, and since then blubber has been distributed in the same manner as the whale meat. In other words, the two boat owners each receive two shares of both meat and blubber, whereas the others receive one share, respectively. Reflecting the fact that the sales of blubber are almost the same as the sales of whale meat in recent years, the share system itself has changed to reflect the current reality. The share to the owner of the shore station has also been eliminated since the shore station was moved to Semple Cay, because the small cay is government-owned land, and the shore station was constructed with financial aid from the Japanese government under the “grant assistance for the grass-roots human security projects program” (see Hamaguchi 2011: 230–232).

Each man’s share, except for the portion given to his own family and gifts to relatives and friends, was sold to other Bequians at the shore station. The price of both whale meat and blubber was EC\$4 (US\$1.5) per pound in 1998⁴. These prices have increased to EC\$5 (US\$1.9) since 2003.

The distribution of the whale products through a share system and their redistribution as gifts and through cash sales play a significant role in maintaining the whaling culture in Bequia, allowing it to be passed from generation to generation. What should not be missed here is the local consumption of the whale products. The Bequian whalers are allowed to harvest only four whales a year because of the Schedule to the ICRW, which sets the catch quota of 20 humpback whales for five years. Furthermore, a whale is not necessarily harvested every year. Whenever a humpback is harvested, Bequians rush to buy the meat. The consumption of whale meat at least once a year reinforces the concept that the people of Bequia are residents of a whaling island.

To be fulfilled culturally is completely different from being nutritionally satisfied. Even without the humpback whale meat, Bequians do not suffer from nutritional deficiency. However, the damage to their cultural identity when they are cut off from whale meat is immeasurable.

4. Whaling in Bequia: Discussions at the Annual Meeting of the International Whaling Commission

The harvesting of humpback whales by the Bequians of St. Vincent and the Grenadines

was approved as a form of “aboriginal subsistence whaling” under paragraph 13(b)(4) of the Schedule to the ICRW. The following section discusses how Bequian whaling has been dealt with internationally, by focusing on the debate concerning amendments to the Schedule.

4.1 Schedule Amendment at the 39th Annual Meeting of the IWC in 1987: Approval of Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling

St. Vincent and the Grenadines became a contracting government of the ICRW during the 33rd Annual Meeting of the IWC, in 1981 (IWC 1982: 17). It officially requested a quota of humpback whales for the Bequians under the category of “aboriginal subsistence whaling” at the 38th Annual Meeting, in 1986 (IWC 1987: 19). At the 39th Annual Meeting, in 1987, the Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling Sub-Committee of the IWC considered the case of whaling in Bequia and accepted its “aboriginal subsistence whaling” status (IWC 1988: 21). In response to the acceptance of this status, St. Vincent and the Grenadines proposed a schedule amendment to the Technical Committee of the IWC to include the harvesting of humpback whales by the Bequians under paragraph 13(b) of the Schedule. The Technical Committee agreed to this proposal, and after adding further amendments to its wording, the Commission approved the request by St. Vincent and the Grenadines (IWC 1988: 21). The final Schedule amendment at this annual meeting was as follows:

Paragraph 13(b)

(4) For the seasons 1987/88 to 1989/90 the taking of 3 humpback whales each season is permitted by Bequians of St Vincent and The Grenadines, but only when the meat and products of such whales are to be used exclusively for local consumption in St Vincent and The Grenadines (IWC 1988: 31).

Concerning this Schedule amendment, the Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling Sub-Committee drew attention to the practices of Bequian whaling and the implications under Schedule paragraph 14, which forbade the taking of suckling calves or female whales accompanied by calves (IWC 1988: 21). St. Vincent and the Grenadines, on the other hand, stated at the Technical Committee that it would make an effort in the future to get the only remaining harpooner to comply with Schedule paragraph 14 (IWC 1988: 21). This revealed that there had been a discrepancy between Bequian whaling practices and the requirements of Schedule paragraph 14 (namely, harvesting of “a mother and calf”) since the approval of Bequian whaling as a form of “aboriginal subsistence whaling”.

4.2 Schedule Amendment at the 42nd Annual Meeting of the IWC in 1990: Whaling by the Only Old Harpooner

At the Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling Sub-Committee of the 42nd Annual Meeting of the IWC, in 1990, St. Vincent and the Grenadines requested that the catch quota for the Bequians be renewed.

The government stated that although the only harpooner in Bequia was 69 years old and there had been no catch for the past two years, the catch quota was culturally necessary for the Bequians, who valued their whaling tradition (IWC 1991: 31). The report of the Scientific Committee showed that a catch of three humpback whales would not affect the stock and the remaining harpooner was aware of the regulations on harvesting females and suckling calves (IWC 1991: 31). On the basis of these facts, St. Vincent and the Grenadines requested a renewal of the three-year catch quota of three whales per year (IWC 1991: 31).

Seychelles and the United Kingdom, on the other hand, said that the need for St. Vincent and the Grenadines appeared to be cultural rather than nutritional and would call for a quota greater than zero (IWC 1991: 31). Australia, New Zealand, and Seychelles also recognized the cultural need for whaling in Bequia, but in the light of very low level of catches in the past several years, they expressed reservations as to the continued need for the quota to remain at the same level (IWC 1991: 31).

At the Technical Committee, St. Vincent and the Grenadines outlined the situation of the remaining harpooner in Bequia in the same way it did at the Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling Sub-Committee (IWC 1991: 32). It proposed a renewal of the annual catch quota of three whales for a further three years, and Iceland, Japan, and Norway seconded this proposal (IWC 1991: 32). The Technical Committee agreed to amend the Schedule, and the Commission approved the amendment by consensus (IWC 1991: 32).

The final Schedule amendment at this annual meeting was to update the whaling seasons listed in the Schedule paragraph from “the seasons 1987/88 to 1989/90” (IWC 1988: 31) to “the seasons 1990/91 to 1992/93” (IWC 1991: 50).

Since Bequian whaling was approved as a form of “aboriginal subsistence whaling”, St. Vincent and the Grenadines emphasized that the whaling was done only by the elderly harpooner. However, overemphasizing “the only old harpooner” may hinder the reaffirmation of the status of aboriginal subsistence whaling when the next generation inherits the tradition of whaling. The reason is that anti-whaling countries have assumed that once the elderly harpooner dies, that whaling will also disappear in Bequia.

In my view, anti-whaling countries tend to interpret matters to their own advantage. Let us consider the cultural need for whaling. To calculate a catch quota on the basis of nutritional need is possible, since such a need is quantifiable. However, quantifying a cultural need for whaling is difficult. For this reason, anti-whaling countries avoid the calculation of a catch quota. Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and other countries opposed to whaling appear to be of the opinion that if a catch quota greater than zero is culturally necessary, one whale should be enough.

4.3 Schedule Amendment at the 45th Annual Meeting of the IWC in 1993: Reduction of the Catch Quota

Just prior to the 45th Annual Meeting of the IWC, in 1993, a cow and calf were harvested in the waters around Bequia. Anti-whaling countries considered this to be an infraction of the Schedule. Although the Infractions Sub-Committee normally considered

only infractions from the previous year, St. Vincent and the Grenadines agreed to provide information on the taking of a cow and calf (IWC 1994: 15). It stressed the difficulties involved in regulating small-scale whaling done by one elderly man in a remote area (IWC 1994: 15).

The Netherlands, on the other hand, emphasized that infractions committed by small aboriginal subsistence whaling should be treated with the same rigor as any other, and New Zealand urged St. Vincent and the Grenadines to fulfill its responsibility under the ICRW (IWC 1994: 15).

Although St. Vincent and the Grenadines described the aboriginal needs and requested a catch quota of three whales at the Aboriginal Subsistence Cub-committee, Australia expressed reservations about the case presented (IWC 1994: 17).

At the plenary session, St. Vincent and the Grenadines requested a continuation of the three-year catch quota that had been established since 1987 from a stock estimated at over 5,000 humpback whales (IWC 1994: 17). It stated that this request was based on the cultural need of the people who had been engaged in whaling since 1875 (IWC 1994: 17). However, after considering the situation surrounding Bequian whaling, St. Vincent and the Grenadines thought that it was prudent to request a catch of two humpback whales for each of the next three years (IWC 1994: 17). Norway, Japan, Denmark, Dominica, and the USA supported this proposal (IWC 1994: 17).

Australia, on the other hand, requested an updated document on the cultural need, and the Netherlands suggested a one-year catch quota because of the advanced age of the harpooner (IWC 1994: 17). However, St. Vincent and the Grenadines responded strongly to these recommendations, and ultimately the Commission agreed by consensus to amend the Schedule (IWC 1994: 17). The final Schedule amendment at this annual meeting was as follows:

Paragraph 13(b)

(4) For the seasons 1993/94 to 1995/96 the taking of 2 humpback whales each season is permitted by Bequians of St Vincent and The Grenadines, but only when the meat and products of such whales are to be used exclusively for local consumption in St Vincent and The Grenadines (IWC 1994: 39).

It was clear from the series of debates at this annual meeting that anti-whaling countries, such as Australia, New Zealand, and the Netherlands, were not sympathetic to a small island state undertaking aboriginal subsistence whaling — the fewer whales harvested, the better for those countries. They did not take into account the livelihood and culture of the people living on a small island that depend on a few whales. Reducing the catch quota by one whale from three humpback whales (the catch quota for the Bequians as of 1993) must have had a large impact. On the other hand, reducing one whale from the catch quota of 169 gray whales (the catch quota for the indigenous people in Chukotka as of 1993) or from the catch quota of 41 bowhead whales (the catch quota for the indigenous people in Alaska as of 1993) would have a lesser impact. For anti-whaling countries, one whale was one whale. In order to protect one whale, they

chose the easiest way.

4.4 Schedule Amendment at the 48th Annual Meeting of the IWC in 1996:

Participation of a Young Harpooner

At the Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling Sub-Committee of the 48th Annual Meeting of IWC, in 1996, St. Vincent and the Grenadines reported that no whales had been harvested for the last three years, but the elderly harpooner continued to go whaling and that a young harpooner participated in whaling with a new whaling boat (IWC 1997: 27). Then it requested that the current quota of two whales, reflecting the continuing cultural need of the Bequians, be renewed for the next three years (IWC 1997: 27).

Australia, on the other hand, suggested that the participation of a new young whaler changed the situation, and explained that it had believed that aboriginal subsistence whaling on Bequia would be phased out slowly as the elderly whaler became less active (IWC 1997: 28). Although Australia was responsible for this one-sided assumption, it was true that at past annual meetings St. Vincent and the Grenadines had suggested that there would be no continuation of whaling after the retirement of the elderly harpooner.

St. Vincent and the Grenadines had repeatedly stated that the only remaining harpooner in charge of whaling in Bequia was of advanced age and asked for leniency in the case of his whaling methods when a mother and calf were harvested. However, with a young harpooner beginning to participate in whaling, the situation changed. St. Vincent and the Grenadines could no longer tell a story reminiscent of “The Old Man and the Sea” at the annual meetings of the IWC. To acquire a quota, the country had to speak out openly about its needs, placing St. Vincent and the Grenadines firmly into the pro-whaling camp. As a result, the friction between anti-whaling countries and St. Vincent and the Grenadines became more serious.

In the end, the Commission agreed by consensus to amend the Schedule proposed by St. Vincent and the Grenadines (IWC 1997: 28). The final Schedule amendment at this annual meeting was to update the whaling seasons listed in the Schedule paragraph from “the seasons 1993/94 to 1995/96” (IWC 1994: 39) to “the seasons 1996/97 to 1998/99” (IWC 1997: 47).

4.5 Schedule Amendment at the 51st Annual Meeting of the IWC in 1999:

Clarification of the Regulation Prohibiting the Taking of a Calf

At the Infractions Sub-Committee of the 51st Annual Meeting of the IWC, in 1999, the discussion over whales harvested by the Bequian whalers in 1998 and 1999 became complicated.

The USA noted that, according to the Scientific Committee, there was a high probability that any humpback whale less than eight meters in the breeding area during the winter season was a calf (IWC 2000a: 14). This suggested that the smaller whales caught in 1998 and 1999 in Bequia were calves, and if so, they were taken in violation of paragraph 14 of the Schedule (IWC 2000a: 14). It also believed that the larger female whales taken were accompanying calves, which was also in violation of paragraph 14 of the Schedule (IWC 2000a: 14).

In addition, New Zealand, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom stated that these cases clearly constituted infractions, since paragraph 14 of the Schedule prohibited the taking of a suckling calf and a female whale accompanied by a calf (IWC 2000a: 14).

Norway, on the other hand, presented the following opinion. Paragraph 14 of the Schedule was part of the provisions established for “commercial whaling” and did not apply to “aboriginal subsistence whaling” by St. Vincent and the Grenadines (IWC 2000a: 15). Paragraph 13 of the Schedule regulated “aboriginal subsistence whaling” and prohibited the taking of a calf and female accompanied by a calf for bowhead whales and gray whales, but there was no such provision on the taking of humpback whales by the Bequians (IWC 2000a: 15). Therefore, the cases did not constitute infractions.

St. Vincent and the Grenadines faced a strong wave of criticism from anti-whaling countries due to the harvesting of smaller whales. However, it responded to the Netherlands, New Zealand, and the USA that the smaller whale was not a suckling calf, because it had no milk in its stomach (IWC 2000a: 15).

Japan defended St. Vincent and the Grenadines, stating that the prohibition on the taking of calves had its origin in the age of commercial whaling based on the consideration of economic efficiency, and that it was inappropriate in the case of “aboriginal subsistence whaling” by the St. Vincent and the Grenadines (IWC 2000a: 15).

Since there was no consensus on this issue, the Chair of the Infractions Sub-Committee submitted the differing views to the Commission (IWC 2000a: 15).

At the Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling Sub-Committee of this annual meeting, St. Vincent and the Grenadines requested a renewal of its quota of two humpback whales a year and stressed the need for the continuation of this small quota (IWC 2000a: 17). An extensive debate then followed, dealing with such aspects as the possibility of a continuation of whaling after the retirement of the elderly whaler, the whaling methods used, the possibility of taking a mother and calf, the importance of documented needs, the social, subsistence and cultural aspects, and so forth (IWC 2000a: 17).

After the debate, the Chair of the Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling Sub-Committee noted that although many countries supported the request by St. Vincent and the Grenadines, there was no consensus (IWC 2000a: 17).

At the plenary session, St. Vincent and the Grenadines repeated its request for a quota of two humpback whales for each of the next three years from 2000 to 2002 (IWC 2000a: 17). It stressed that its nutritional need had been accepted in 1994 and 1996, and that paragraph 14 of the Schedule did not apply to the aboriginal subsistence whaling by the Bequians (IWC 2000a: 17). It also questioned why there was a problem with taking two whales from a stock of 10,600, given that even a catch of three whales would not harm the stock (IWC 2000a: 17).

Ireland eventually proposed an amendment to the Schedule by adding the following sentence, “It is forbidden to strike, take, or kill calves or any humpback whale accompanied by a calf” to paragraph 13(b)(4) (IWC 2000a: 17–18). After discussion on the proposed amendment, the Chair of the Commission reported that consensus had been reached on the Schedule amendment (IWC 2000a: 18).

Japan welcomed the agreement but commented that this non-issue had taken too much time, since people commonly ate small chickens, lamb and veal (IWC 2000a: 18).

Ultimately, an agreement was reached by consensus and the regulation prohibiting the taking of a calf was clarified to state that a humpback whale calf was an animal less than eight meters long (IWC 2000a: 18). This clarification would be troublesome for the Bequian whalers who had traditionally harvested small whales with no milk in their stomachs. The final Schedule amendment at this annual meeting was as follows:

Paragraph 13(b)

(4) For the seasons 2000 to 2002 the taking of 2 humpback whales each season is permitted by Bequians of St Vincent and The Grenadines, but only when the meat and products of such whales are to be used exclusively for local consumption in St Vincent and The Grenadines. It is forbidden to strike, take or kill calves or any humpback whale accompanied by a calf (IWC 2000b: 86).

4.6 Schedule Amendment at the 54th Annual Meeting of the IWC in 2002: Political Triumph

At the 54th Annual Meeting of the IWC, in 2002, the Scientific Committee agreed that the population of the West Indies breeding stock of humpback whales was approximately 10,750 in 1992 and had increased around 3% per year from 1979 to 1992, and that a catch up to four whales a year would be unlikely to harm this stock (IWC 2003a: 11, 18).

St. Vincent and the Grenadines submitted a needs statement to the Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling Sub-Committee that provided a historical background on Bequian whaling, a summary of the social and cultural aspects of whaling, and information establishing the nutritional need for whaling (IWC 2003a: 18). According to the statement, two whales supplied roughly 12% of the animal protein need for the Bequians in 1982, but this decreased to 6% in 2002 as a result of a population increase (IWC 2003a: 18). Therefore, it stated that a quota of four whales was required to meet the current nutritional need (IWC 2003a: 18).

Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, on the other hand, advocated that a precautionary approach should be taken given the uncertainty of the scientific status of the stock (IWC 2003a: 18). The United Kingdom also suggested that there was an assurance given by St. Vincent and the Grenadines in 1990 that whaling would cease after the retirement of the then 69 year old harpooner (IWC 2003a: 18). Moreover, New Zealand, and Monaco claimed that whaling in Bequia was undertaken by the descendants of Scottish and French settlers and was a continuation of the whaling from the colonial period (IWC 2003a 18).

Dominica objected to the implication that Bequian whaling was colonial whaling rather than “aboriginal subsistence whaling”, stating that the indigenous people of the Caribbean, the Caribs, had harvested whales long before the arrival of slavery and colonialism (IWC 2003a: 18).

After the discussion at the Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling Sub-Committee, St.

Vincent and the Grenadines proposed a Schedule amendment to the Commission that would allow the Bequians to harvest a total of 20 humpback whales for five years (IWC 2003a: 23).

In the end, the Schedule amendment proposed by St. Vincent and the Grenadines was adopted by consensus after revising a part of the original text (IWC 2003a: 24). The final Schedule amendment at this annual meeting was as follows:

Paragraph 13(b)

(4) For the seasons 2003–2007 the number of humpback whales to be taken by the Bequians of St. Vincent and The Grenadines shall not exceed 20. The meat and products of such whales are to be used exclusively for local consumption in St. Vincent and The Grenadines. Such whaling must be conducted under formal legislation that accords with the submission of the Government of St. Vincent and The Grenadines (IWC/54/AS 8 rev2). The quota for the seasons 2006 and 2007 shall only become operative after the Commission has received advice from Scientific Committee that the take of 4 humpback whales for each season is unlikely to endanger the stock (IWC 2003b: 140).

It was in the context of the simultaneous renewal of the Bequian humpback whale quota and the Alaskan bowhead whale quota at the 2002 IWC meeting that Japan and the USA directly clashed. Japan was a whaling country, and hence it was natural for it to lend its support to St. Vincent and the Grenadines. However, it opposed the renewal of the US aboriginal subsistence whaling quota because the USA was against the resumption of small-type coastal whaling of minke whales in Japan (see Hamaguchi 2003: 411–413). Therefore, if the USA was to succeed in renewing the quota for the indigenous people of Alaska, it had no choice but to offer its support to St. Vincent and the Grenadines. As a result, the Bequians were granted a five-year quota to harvest 20 humpback whales (an annual average of four whales) (IWC 2003a: 23–24; 2003b: 140). The whaling period was extended from three years to five, and the annual quota was doubled from two to four. This was a result that could never have been imagined given earlier arguments and discussions.

4.7 Schedule Amendment at the 59th Annual Meeting of the IWC in 2007:

Stabilization of the Catch Quota

At the 59th Annual Meeting of the IWC, in 2007, St. Vincent and the Grenadines proposed a Schedule amendment to renew the current catch quota (20 in total) for another five years, and this proposal was adopted by consensus (IWC 2008a: 23). The final Schedule amendment at this annual meeting was as follows:

Paragraph 13(b)

(4) For the seasons 2008–2012 the number of humpback whales to be taken by the Bequians of St. Vincent and The Grenadines shall not exceed 20. The meat and products of such whales are to be used exclusively for local consumption in St. Vincent and The Grenadines (IWC 2008b: 156).

Given the discussion above of Japanese and US interests concerning whaling, it is apparent that Bequian whaling will be secure as long as St. Vincent and the Grenadines cooperates with the USA, being backed by the other whaling countries like Japan and Norway.

5. Concluding Remarks

Bequian whaling has been a modest fishery that harvests a few humpback whales per year. However, it has become a symbol of the culture of the island and a symbol of the collective identity of the islanders, whereas the whale has had a different meaning in the context of many Western societies: a symbol of environmentalism. Further, whaling countries such as Japan and Norway have regarded St. Vincent and the Grenadines as a small but important whaling country that should be protected. In this tangled web of international relations, the Bequian whalers, using their symbolic status, have obtained financial aid, innovated their whaling activities and tried to strengthen their livelihood. This is simply a way of life for the Bequian whalers, who are forced to live within the framework of global society.

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Notes

- 1) Field research was carried out in February 1991, March 1993, May 1994, March 1997, February to March 1998, August 2000, March 2001, August 2003, March 2005, and February 2009, for an aggregate time of three months.
- 2) During the research period, 1 US dollar was equivalent to 2.67 EC dollars.
- 3) Although a humpback whale was harvested in 2003, it was processed, distributed and sold at the seaside of Semple Cay owing to the suspension of the construction of a shore station. The new shore station was finally completed in 2005, with Japanese financial assistance (see Hamaguchi 2011: 230–232).
- 4) The price of whale meat was EC\$3 in 1986 (Ward 1988: 90).

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